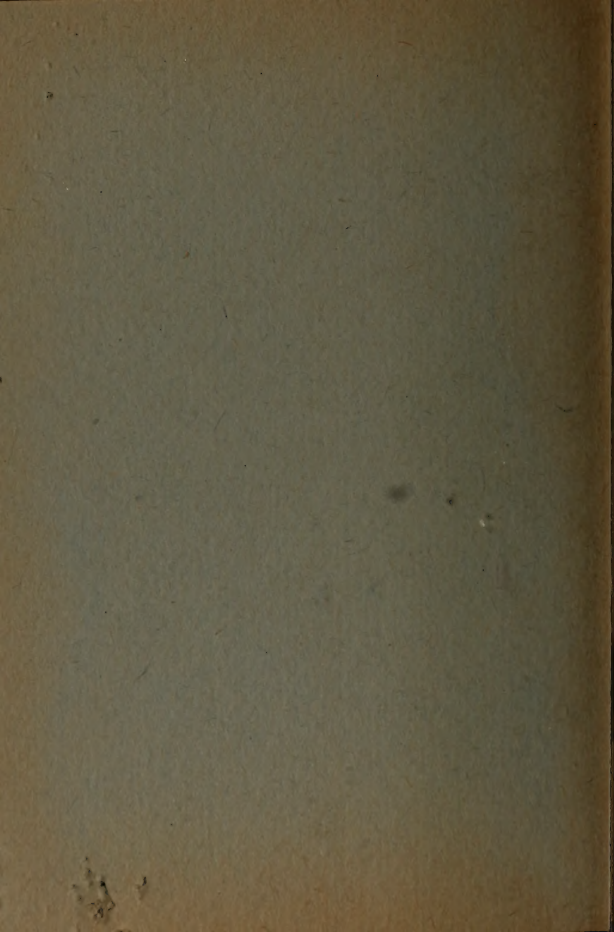


LITTLE BLUE BOOK NO. 1215  
Edited by E. Haldeman-Julius

# Robert G. Ingersoll: Benevolent Agnostic

Joseph McCabe



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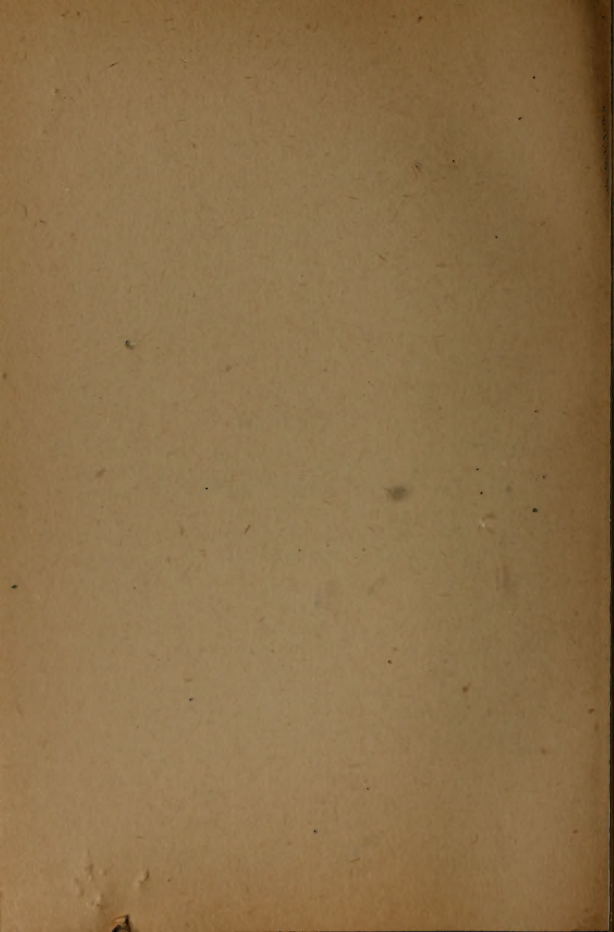
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# ROBERT G. INGERSOLL: BENEVOLENT AGNOSTIC

## CHAPTER I

### EARLY GROWTH

In his *God the Invisible King* Mr. H. G. Wells has a section on "The Religion of Atheists." This modern fashion of giving the name "religion" to a man's idealism is tantalizing. For decades we have heard that idealism would perish with religion, in the old sense of the word, and, now that we find ourselves with more idealism and less religion than ever, we are smilingly assured that idealism is precisely the religion. I am old-fashioned and conservative, and I assured Wells that I have no religion or even, to use his word, "religiosity," but he genially disregarded me. I figure in the book, as a type of "the benevolent unbeliever," in the too flattering company of Professor Metchnikoff, one of the most brilliant of modern physiologists, Dr. Chalmers Mitchell, one of the most distinguished British zoologists, Sir Gilbert Murray, one of the ablest of living Hellenists, and Sir Harry Johnston, most learned of travelers and most humane of anthropologists.

How Wells, one of the keenest-eyed of men,



missed Robert G. Ingersoll and chose me when he wanted to examine a "benevolent unbeliever" I cannot understand. Amongst the Great Rationalists who have proved that the cultivation of high standards of personal and collective conduct does not in the least depend upon religion Ingersoll has a unique position. He excels particularly in those graces and delicacies of individual character, in that richness and tenderness of sentiment, which are most loudly claimed to be inseparable from religion. With that general zeal for human welfare and advancement which has distinguished nearly every prominent Rationalist for the last century and a half he unites a geniality of disposition, an overflowing generosity, a standard of taste and conduct that would be called ascetic if it were not for the joy of living that glows in his entire being, a rare blend of happiness and temperateness. An intense lover of Burns, he himself never tasted alcohol. Eager to use every weapon to undeceive his fellows about the Bible and the work of Christianity, he nevertheless could not bring himself to quote the cruder passages of the Old Testament or to dwell upon the sexual license of the ages of faith. Thoroughly human in his appreciation of the pleasures which came of the high position and wealth to which his great gifts entitled him, he yet resolutely refused to make more money by sealing his lips on the subject of religion. Capable, as few men were, of swaying masses of people with his wonderful oratory, he took such care as orators rarely take that the seed which he



implanted in the minds of men was the seed of truth, justice, and peace. . . .

But let me preface my little study of Ingersoll with a few questions to the religious reader who, more familiar with pulpit rhetoric about the "fruits of infidelity," may approach such a study with some reluctance.

Do you believe in prohibition or (since I do not myself believe in it) in the ideal of human welfare which inspires the genuine prohibitionist? Do you believe that it was an obvious human duty to abolish the last traces of slavery and serfdom? Do you believe that a nation acts with elementary humanity when it seeks to alleviate poverty and protect the weak? Do you believe that the nations follow an instinct of civilization in proposing to erect tribunals of arbitration instead of the barbaric arbitrament of war? Do you believe that the duel was a relic of barbarism? Do you believe that it is just that the citizens of a State, who bleed in its wars and suffer in its misfortunes, should choose the men who are to control its life? Do you believe that women citizens should share this right? Do you believe that it is a wise and beneficent thing to educate all citizens? Do you believe that even animals ought to be protected from cruelty? Do you believe that religious toleration is an elementary recognition of human rights? Do you believe that the lower races should be protected from cruelty, theft, and exploitation? . . . I might extend the list over several pages, but I ask only one more question: How is it that these moral advances began only when

skepticism began in the eighteenth century, and culminated when skepticism spread to the majority of the civilized race at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century?

These are broad historical truths. We may quarrel—we ought not, since statistics are available—as to whether vice and violence are increasing, but we cannot quarrel about these things. Men, then women, were enfranchised, and the last remnants of slavery (in America) and serfdom (in Russia) were abolished, at well-known dates within the last century. Education was provided, laws to prevent cruelty to wives, children, or animals were passed, social and industrial legislation appeared, schemes of arbitration were framed, at definite dates in modern times. In other words, on the moral test which it is easiest and safest to use, the test of collective conduct, the idealism of the modern race has grown with its infidelity.

What the true relation of idealism to materialism is we shall see in Little Blue Book No. 1229, *The Triumph of Materialism*, but these little biographies exhibit it, perhaps, more convincingly than do arguments. In Paine we saw how a fine inspiration of service coincided with a rejection of Christian beliefs, though belief in God and immortality remained. In Ingersoll, whom we take as a type of the next and deeper phase of American skepticism, we shall see how, when the last religious beliefs were abandoned, the finer qualities of

mind and character seem to develop more rapidly than ever.

A recent and important biographer of Lincoln, Mr. N. W. Stephenson, speaks of "the wave of ultra-rationalism that went over America in the forties." I do not know whether he has more intellectual admiration for the wave of Spiritualism that succeeded it in the fifties, but it would be a public service if the sociological section of one of the universities were to make an inquiry into this "ultra-rationalism" and its effects; for beyond all question there was a great growth of idealism in America in the forties. The ideal of temperance spread rapidly. The resentment of slavery advanced quickly to the stage of becoming a continental force. All the philanthropic isms of later America began to 'germinate'; and the early years of Ingersoll, which fall in that period, illustrate the germination.

Robert Green Ingersoll was born on August 11th, 1833, in the large village of Dresden on the shore of Seneca Lake (New York State). He came of a sober stock, but I am, as I explained, not much interested in a man's ancestors. His mother died three years after his birth, so he never knew her influence. His father was a Congregationalist clergyman, though he was at the time in charge of a Presbyterian church, as he often was. The Presbyterians were short of ministers and the Congregationalists of churches, and they were near enough to each other to exchange.

The Rev. John Ingersoll was the chief teacher and trainer of Robert until he reached

adolescence, and possibly the Christian who learns for the first time what a really fine man the infidel was will want the credit given to his clerical parent. To some extent let us give it. He certainly taught the boy honesty, truthfulness, and temperateness. The Rev. John was a very sincere Christian, on revised or Protestant lines. He ventured to differ from Christ by marrying and begetting children, but otherwise he was very earnest. Ingersoll is in his references to his father a little distracted between loyalty to a good parent and dislike of his creed. The Rev. John was strictly just, more than strictly temperate, and he had a great love of his children; but—it creeps out—the creed cast a “shadow” over the home. Early biographers, who seem to know more about it than they tell, remark that Ingersoll rarely spoke about his boyhood, and that this was because he could say little good of it.

The facts are not obscure. It was as happy a Christian home as a somber creed, an early loss of the mother, and straitened circumstances permitted. The father changed his clerical station about once a year; and the only clue to this wandering is that he was an ardent abolitionist and prohibitionist (of tobacco and nice things to eat as well as drink). “Green” was included in the boy’s name because it was the name of an early abolitionist. Abolition and prohibition were the fundamental tones of the boy’s daily lessons. Even the diet was austere. What could a poor man do, anyway, on \$200 a year—this is stated to

have been the salary at one of the Rev. John's numerous settlements—and five children? Generally, however, his charges were in rural districts, and living was cheap in those days.

The most interesting point is that the boy Robert had not at all the temperament of the elect, yet he was never tempted to react on the early severity by breaking loose, as parsons' sons so commonly do. We perceive in the formation of his character quite the opposite of a Christian influence. It is absurd and historically false to say that a boy who has been trained to certain habits by the rod and the fear of hell will automatically continue in those habits when the rod and the fear of hell gather dust in the old nursery. With adolescence comes the note of interrogation. The palate for the forbidden fruit develops. Kentucky rye and Bourbon smelt good in the old days, and the prohibition extended to a great variety of tempting things—good cigars, women, dancing, lying, cheating, swearing, reading Voltaire or Paine, and so on. The young Rationalist had to examine each of these things for himself. He decided that whiskey was bad, a cigar good, and an occasional "Damn" immaterial; that the paternal standard was good on its puritan side and bad on its ascetic side; that lying and cheating were wrong, but reading both sides of a question was supremely right.

This creed of Ingersoll's adolescence and manhood was his own, not his father's. "He was grand enough," says Ingersoll, "to say to me that I had the same right to my opinions

that he had to his." At what age the father reached this Christian grandeur he does not say. In boyhood Bob got the cane when, in Sunday school, he paralyzed the lady teacher with awkward questions about certain peculiar features of the Old Testament. He was not the kind of boy to be intimidated by canes: a healthy, restless, rather mischievous and adventurous boy, but so straight in it all that his nickname was "honest Bob." He had little formal education and was chiefly taught by his father, who passed in his very small world as being rather learned. The son later educated the father. He ceased to believe in hell and he, after fifty years brooding over it—such is the "religious instinct"—perceived that much of the Old Testament was too human and Hebraic to be inspired. The last glimpse we have of him is Robert Ingersoll reading to him, on his death-bed, Plato on immortality!

I have necessarily presented the father as rather dour, but let us put in a human trait. In early unregenerate life the Rev. John had been a great wrestler, and in 1842, in the midst of his pious career, he one day doffed his black clothes and brought down some local champion. "I was," he apologized to his flock, "tempted to wrestle with this man, which was not becoming in a minister—but I threw him in less than a minute." The flock was satisfied.

At the age of eighteen we find Robert an independent personality. He liked a good cigar and good company. Industry had not hitherto been his primary virtue, but he was



a clever reciter (with a strong liking for Burns and Byron) and a good conversationalist. He was conscious that he had sentiment and some power of poetic expression and he wrote verse. But the business of life now lay before him. I take it that he had not been a model of industry as a school boy (the biographers say) mainly because he instinctively felt that more than half the stuff which children are ordered to learn is useless. At eighteen, in 1851, he had to confront his future, and he began the preliminary studies for a lawyer's career and worked hard.

The biographers are not as clear as one could wish about these early years. This is due, no doubt, to Ingersoll's own healthy impatience of giving "biographical details," but a really good study of Ingersoll is still to be written. E. G. Smith's *Life and Reminiscences* (1904) and the other early biographers are too slight in material and too heavily eulogistic to carry any conviction to the critical reader. Kittredge's *Ingersoll* (1911) is much better, but it is too largely a manual of the author's opinions, it gushes too much, and it has the common biographical fault of taking great pains to settle dates and places and similar small details and less trouble to explain the evolution of a fine personality. The latest small biography, C. T. Gorham's *R. G. Ingersoll* (1921), is little more than a string of passages from Ingersoll's lectures with naive criticisms of them by the compiler. The book is published by the British Rationalist Press Association and written by the secretary,

of the Association, yet the opening sentences of it would have made Ingersoll frown:

In the childhood of the human race religion is a good and necessary thing. It may be that adult humanity will find it equally good and equally indispensable.

There was once a prophet named Balaam who had an ass. . . .

Mainly using Kittredge's record of facts, I try here to disentangle and expound the significance of Ingersoll as the highest American representative of Rationalist principles in the second half of the nineteenth century.

We need not linger long over the first twenty years. The ancestry explains nothing, for the study of it issues in what we should least expect—a character of the most buoyant, expansive, rebellious, sun-loving type. The early education, again, explains little, because the good ideals implanted by it were put on false foundations and were mingled with false ideals. Just at the time when Ingersoll begins to make himself, in adolescence, we are told little that is really vital about him. It is clear enough that he began early to see that he could not accept it as a serious rule of conduct that God wished a thing or Jesus set a good example. The first chapter in legal education would tell Ingersoll that the person on trial is not a good witness. God and Jesus, he found, were very decidedly on trial.

But all Rationalists will know how the young man shaped his human creed. Any man can dislike alcohol, for instance, and regard it as

a cause of much misery, without asking what Jehovah thinks about the matter or speculating why Jesus never mentions wine except in friendly or appreciative terms. I happen to agree with Jesus, but I quite understand Ingersoll. A youth can choose for his life's sake that he will be sober, just, truthful, and honorable. It has nothing to do with religion. In fact, one of the latest improvements on Jesus in New York is a new preacher—very prosperous, by all accounts—whose gospel is, not that the Christian life saves in the next world, but that it pays in this. The simple fact about Ingersoll is that he made the discovery seventy years ago; but he made the additional discovery that this was not Christianity.

Generosity of tempera'ment, on the other hand, is inborn. Neither Christian nor any other principles can manufacture it. Ingersoll had it in an exceptional degree. To help to cover his cost of education he in 1852 opened a private school, and, when he found at the end of the first term that half the pupils had not paid and professed that they could not pay, he receipted their bills. But an incident which partly reveals his impulsiveness and partly shows his new human creed of life soon—happily for history—put him out of the teaching world.

The school was at Metropolis, in Illinois, to which state his itinerant father had moved, and Robert lived in a boarding house. Some religious celebration brought a bunch of parsons to the house, and they one night discussed baptism. Did the teacher believe in the effi-

cacy of the baptismal water, they asked young Ingersoll. "Yes," says Robert, "with soap." So infidelity bore its usual fruits, which are Christian malice and malignity, and ruin. Robert had to close the school and go to live with his family at Marion, working in the County Offices while he studied law. On December 20th, 1854, he was admitted to the bar.

## CHAPTER II

## THE INFIDEL MAKES GOOD

The decisive refutation of the idea that Ingersoll owed his fine character to his early religious environment is the fact that he was turned twenty-five, and left Christianity far behind him, before he attracted any attention. If up to that date he had been esteemed for anything it was for a quality—his sparkle, his love of sunshine—which no one would dream of tracing to his home or his parents or his creed.

The two chief biographers seem to contradict each other at this stage. Smith, who ought to know best, says that at the age of twenty-nine Ingersoll "had not yet done anything" and was just an obscure young attorney like a thousand others. Kittredge, on the contrary, gives Ingersoll a brilliant reputation and great prosperity in his twenty-fifth year. The truth, no doubt, lies between the two. In 1855 Robert went into law partnership with his brother Clark (or Ebon Clark) at Shawneetown, but in 1857 they were prosperous enough to move to Peoria, a larger and busier town. Here, unquestionably, Ingersoll made a name; and to make a name at the Illinois bar in those days was not a light achievement. Lincoln and other able lawyers were then in the field. The *Peoria Journal* said at his death that from

1857 onward he was much in demand for his services.

But the chronicle of his steps is not of so much interest here as the story of his inner development. It was in these years, from twenty-five to thirty, that the young infidel made good, and it is a pity that he has left us no intimate autobiography of them. His biographers tell us punctiliously at what date he left one third-rate town in Illinois for another, what the address of his law office was, and how many times the name on the brass plate changed. Meantime he was evolving rapidly into a personality of equal charm and power—a rare combination—and it seems to be to them of no more interest than the color he chose for the painting of his house. It is the fashion of biographers.

We have to construct his evolution, partly from general experience—he was one of thousands the world over who were then passing from Christianity to Agnosticism—and partly from the way in which he freely exposes his inspirations in his lectures. What manner of man he was I will describe in the fifth chapter, but both his personality and his motives will sufficiently appear throughout. He was the last man in the world to do anything because his father had told him to do it, and on false grounds, or because he had contracted the habit of doing it in childhood. The arch-rebel against tradition, the man who most eloquently denounced the common habit of following traditional or conventional modes of behavior without seriously reflecting on them,



cannot without absurdity be accused of practicing Christian virtues because he had once been a Christian. The easiest and most profitable Christian virtue in a provincial American town in the fifties was attendance at church, and Ingersoll repudiated it.

Two incidents of the year 1860 show that he had at least fixed his principles by that date. Although only twenty-seven years old, he was asked to stand as Democratic candidate for Congress against the Republican Judge Kellogg. He lost because of his honesty and humanity. Democratic on most points, he was, as an Abolitionist, fiercely opposed to the Democrats and wholly on the side of Lincoln on what was considered to be the most important point of all. With that scorn of compromise and consequences which was to distinguish his whole career he used his Democratic platform to pour a flood of fiery human resentment on the institution of slavery. It was splendid, but it was not war. He was on the wrong side. A few years later he felt that the anti-slavery issue outweighed all others, and he passed, for the rest of his life, to the Republican party.

The other incident of 1860 is that he then delivered his first Rationalist lecture, at Pekin (Illinois). It was entitled "Progress," and to deliver it at the very opening of his legal career was so bold and dangerous an act that it gives us some measure of his unconquerable honesty. He would know how Lincoln had paid for his "infidelity," even for a private expression of a very limited skepticism. He

remembered that his school had been wrecked at Metropolis by a light joke at the expense of a very secondary religious practice. He was attracted to the political world, in which a man may *do* what he likes but must *say* only what the high priests direct; and he depended for his future upon clients who were, in great part, very sensitive to the sulphuretted odor of infidelity. He never hesitated. We have the lecture as it was repeated some years later, and the closing words will suffice to show how bold it was, and that Ingersoll was already venturing, a little shakily, upon the highly figurative oratory in which he was to excel:

We are standing on the shore of an infinite ocean whose countless waves, freighted with blessings, are welcoming our adventurous feet. Progress has been written on every soul. The human race is advancing. Forward, oh sublime army of progress. Forward until law is justice, forward until ignorance is unknown, forward while there is a spiritual or a temporal throne, forward until superstition is a forgotten dream, forward until the world is free, forward until human reason, clothed in the purple of authority, is king of kings.

It is far from perfect. Waves do not, as a rule, welcome our feet. But it drew attention. Either the lecture had an extensive echo or Ingersoll gave several such lectures, for in the autumn of the following year, when he was to defend a case at Groveland, a noted skeptic of the district came to see and hear him. Mr. Weld Parker was a cultivated Bostonian. His home was appreciated by more than one American of distinction who passed that way, and both he and his wife had studied Paine so well

that they had, unlike him, applied his "reason" and "common sense" to God as well as to Christianity, and were in effect Agnostics. A charming daughter in so charming and congenial a home, to which Ingersoll was promptly invited, seemed almost a melodramatic arrangement of affairs, and on February 13th, 1862, Ingersoll married Eva Parker.

Ingersoll I never saw or heard. These pages may seem cold if compared with the glowing eulogies of biographers who had felt all the thrall of his eloquence and the glow of his personality, but, on the other hand, the lack of that experience will give the reader some security that my estimate is based upon the recorded facts and upon private letters of Ingersoll's that have passed through my hands.

But Mrs. Ingersoll, the Eva Parker of 1862, I have often met in the home of the family at New York. I dislike gush and will say only, in hackneyed phrase but with sincere meaning, that Ingersoll found an ideal mate. As late as 1913 and 1917 I found the home somehow so full of the spirit and presence of Robert Ingersoll that it was difficult to believe that he was not merely at work up-town and would drop in for dinner. I will say more of it in the fifth chapter. Agnostic like himself, moved and directed by the same high ideals as himself, proud of him and devotedly attached to him, conscious that through him she was working for the world in working for him and his children, Eva Ingersoll found the thing which is as beautiful as it is rare, a perfect home, and she gave American mothers for all time a reful-

gent example of an entirely sweet and harmonious and serviceable family-life without a little of either the letter or the spirit of Christianity.

They married, as I said, in February, 1862, and a month later the bridegroom was off to the war. Kittredge is wrong in saying that he was now a Republican. He did not change until 1863. But since his cradle, almost, he had been an Abolitionist. War, bloodshed, violence, hatred, he always detested, but, like Paine, if neighbors would not agree to peace, he thanked heaven that he had a musket. In the autumn of 1861 he got permission to raise a regiment of cavalry, and in October he found himself Colonel of the Eleventh Illinois Cavalry Volunteers, "The Democratic Regiment." The winter was spent in training, and he boldly married on the eve of his departure. It was a bolder venture then than now. None of the dreamy folk who talk about "modern science and war" seem to know that the Civil War was twice as deadly to the combatants as the European War was in 1918.

Ingersoll was popular with his officers and men, and was a good soldier. It is all that concerns us. His character was already firm enough for any test. He would give a wounded man his cover and sleep in the rain. And the last phase illustrates how sincerely and spontaneously human his impulses were. A day came when his force of 800 men—300 of them poorly equipped and 200 meeting fire for the first time—were outnumbered by ten to one. Ingersoll made a skillful effort to extricate his

men, and they stood the fire with all the unembroidered heroism of the time. I think it was General Leonard Wood who once told me about a similar situation in the Civil War, when an excited *aide* came rushing up to General ———, who sat on a fence quietly chewing a straw, and announced that the transport had not come up. "Waal," he said calmly, "I guess if we win we won't need it, and if we're licked—we won't need it either." Ingersoll saw that further resistance was quite useless, and would therefore be criminal on his part. "Stop firing," he shouted, "I'll acknowledge your damned old Confederacy." The troopers got away where they could, and General Forrest, who took him, angrily asked him who was supposed to be in command. "If you'll keep the secret, I'll tell you," said Colonel Ingersoll; "I was." They became warm personal friends.

Ingersoll gave his parole, and he was sent to take charge of a camp of prisoners on parole at St. Louis. There seemed, as time went on, no chance of his returning to the field, and he resigned his commission and returned to civil life at Peoria. Probably the Confederates little realized that his tongue was mightier than his sword, for he now used it with prodigious effect to spur the northerners. Smith tells so circumstantial a story of his passing over to the Republican ranks in St. Louis that we cannot doubt it. Politically now, as well as by his zeal against slavery and his admiration of Lincoln's skepticism, he was entirely on the side of the President, and he worked devotedly. Colonel Carr says:

No man can estimate the power and influence of Ingersoll in arousing the American people to a sense of their solemn responsibilities when the war came upon them, or in awakening them to a sense of justice and a proper appreciation of the rights of man.

Possibly Americans of the present generation hardly realize how deep the need was. My friend, Major Putnam, a survivor of those days, told me that the exhaustion and weariness of France and Britain in 1917 were far less than the misery of the northern States in 1864.

Brilliant success in court and on the platform made Ingersoll so well known that in 1866 he became Attorney General for Illinois, and in 1868, at the Republican State Convention, his name was put forward by a large number of the delegates—Smith says three-fourths of them—as candidate for the Governorship of Illinois. He wanted to be Governor; in fact, he wanted very much to be Governor. His gifts as an orator seemed to fit him particularly for the acquisition of political power, and power to him meant power to do good. But mark well his conduct, you who, from living all your lives in a religious environment, have some honest difficulty in understanding how the moral spine remains healthy when religion is abandoned.

I will take it that you know how politicians usually surmount the little difficulties and obstacles in the way of office. Ingersoll, the infidel, acted otherwise. A group of gentlemen summoned him and explained suavely to him that the Governorship was within his reach if



these talks about religion could be . . . "Good-bye, gentlemen," Ingersoll said, politely taking up his hat. A preacher called on him to ascertain if he really was one of these wicked infidels. Ingersoll, engaging him in conversation, put before him an open book and asked his opinion of the page at which it was opened. It was undeniably fine and idealistic; and the author, said Ingersoll, when the preacher admitted this, is Voltaire! In spite of this gentle art of making enemies, Ingersoll was wanted for the Governorship, but it was pointed out to him that he must cease to criticize religion. He replied:

Gentlemen, I am not asking to be Governor of Illinois. . . . My position I would not, under any circumstances, even for my life, seem to renounce. I would rather refuse to be President of the United States than to do so. My religious belief is my own. It belongs to me, not to the State of Illinois. I would not smother one sentiment of my heart to be the emperor of the round globe.

Clearly he was not fit, people said, to be a Governor of Illinois, and the political door seemed to be slammed against him. This is not, as Smith pretends, literally true, for we shall find him in a far stronger political position presently; and we shall find him sacrificing it for the same sense of honor and truth.

A sincere and thoughtful religious reader would ask me two questions, and I will answer them as sincerely. Why should Ingersoll make such sacrifices for the liberty to attack religion? And how can a utilitarian theory of morals explain such an attitude?

The answer to the first is in part that Ingersoll regarded religion as a worse hindrance to progress than political blunders, but the main answer is that he could not help making the sacrifice, and this must be explained by the answer to the second question. Ingersoll, like most Americans, was an intense individualist; which, I need not say, is a very different thing from selfishness. He chose, as a man has a right to do (within the limits of the rights of his fellows) his own standard of life. He personally loathed hypocrisy and lying and cruelty just as he loathed dirt. To form a character on those tastes—let us for the moment leave it as a matter of taste—means to give it a certain inertia which will often carry it forward when there is no logical reason. If you have formed a generous, straight, honest character, it will express itself in an honest act just as that of the thief will spontaneously express itself in a dishonest act.

But there is much more logic in these things than preachers seem to understand. Said a retired Senator to me: "I never took a bribe in my life—but they always knew where my overcoat was." Which would you prefer, quite apart from questions of God or hell, to see as the normal and recognized standard of American character, that of the grafter or that of Ingersoll? You begin at once to see how there can be "utility" in honor and honesty. I have explained this in an earlier Little Blue Book (*The Human Origin of Morals*, No. 1061). and need add here that Ingersoll, at the close of his career, had certainly no occasion to lament

that honesty was costly. A great contractor—Sir George Jackson, who built the Trans-Andean Railway, and made a million dollars profit by it—privately assured me that honesty had paid him well all his life.

No doubt Ingersoll was sagely criticized, even ridiculed, by smaller men in Peoria at the time. But, when he died, a meeting of its responsible citizens put on record this sentiment:

When the highest honors of the State were his, if he would but avoid the discussion of the questions that relate to futurity, he avowed his belief. . . . At the time that he made his stand, there was before him only the prospect of loss and of the scorn of the public. . . . And we desire to record the fact that we feel that he was greater than a martyr, greater than a saint, greater than a mere hero—he was a thoroughly honest man.

Ingersoll wanted no halo. I believe that if his shade did indeed stand beside me, as I write this, and could speak to me, he would ask me to add a little to the explanation I have given. Between puffs of his ethereal cigar he would say: "My boy, I simply hated and loathed this damned business of toadying in order to get political office. It was quite time that somebody said what every decent man thought. I could afford to do it. Certainly, I should have liked to be Governor. . . . But, by God, I would rather have the luxury of spitting on these contemptible traditions than hold any office."

Not so would Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius talk; but it is a profound pity that more people do not use this robust language. It is more

needed than the Sermon on the Mount and our age understands it.

Ingersoll toiled on, and his fame grew. Two daughters brought joy to his sunny home. A library began to sprawl over its walls. He filled up the gaps in his education. Darwin's *Origin of Species*, published in 1859, and the following works of Huxley and Haeckel, came over the sea, and he got a grip of nature. Burns, Shakespeare, and Dickens, and the best American poets and fiction-writers, he knew as few men do today. He had the rare faculty of recognizing that culture means education in fine emotions as well as in science and history. So rich and luxuriant was his humanism, his joy and pride in all that is good in human nature, his sympathy with its defects and failures, that to seek any other inspiration of his generous impulses is like looking for an angel in the works of an automobile. Burns and Shakespeare were his Bible. And this throbbing human sentiment demanded expression, and, after a few years of discipline of his speech, made him, beyond any question, the greatest orator of the English-speaking world.

## CHAPTER III

## INGERSOLL AS AN ORATOR

I do not find that Ingersoll ever confessed it, but I am confident that he must for years have been haunted by the dream that it was his vocation to become a great poet. Every man who finds or fancies a poetic or figurative quality in his speech has the dream at one time or other, and Ingersoll could not but know that his prose, even in the law-court, was often prose-poetry. The sentence I have quoted from the lecture in 1860 shows it. It fails slightly in the rational control of the imagination or imagery, but it evinces a rich faculty of expressing abstract ideas in concrete pictures, which is the essential quality of the poet.

But it is fortunate that Ingersoll did not become a poet or he would never have been the orator he was. The disciplinary requirements of rhyme and rhythm would have hampered him, whereas the greater freedom of prose or prose-poetry suited his temperament. There are different types of orators, which simply means speakers of the highest rank, artistic and effective. A Greek professor once said, after hearing Ingersoll: "If Demosthenes was ever as eloquent as Ingersoll, he was never properly reported." It is true. Demosthenes was one of the greatest orators who ever lived, but he was not nearly so eloquent as

Ingersoll. I used to know by heart long passages of his famous Philippics, but their qualities are strength and calculated effect rather than eloquence. A further illustration might be drawn from Ingersoll's British contemporary, Charles Bradlaugh; by all accounts a very fine speaker, though not an orator. His strength was in his presence and delivery, which must have been remarkable. No one *reads* his lectures, and few ever did.

By oratory, as distinct from technically fine declamation or speech with power behind it or cheap meretricious stuff of the Billy Sunday type (I have heard him), we usually understand speech, finely and powerfully delivered, which has a disciplined poetic quality; and in this, which we commonly call eloquence, Ingersoll was the prince of orators in his day. He had in full that other power which the orator must have—the power to make his audience weep in sympathy, laugh in disdain, thrill with enthusiasm for a cause. But what moved men most, what makes his published lectures a treasure of the library, was the strictly poetic quality: the power to express a surging emotion with the simple and varied imagery of the poet. Mr. Clarence Darrow once said to me that to enjoy this was a fashion of the nineteenth century: that if such an orator as Ingersoll appeared today he would certainly not fill the Chicago Auditorium. I ventured to think that Mr. Darrow is quite wrong. Not until we lose the sense of art and beauty—which the gods forbid—shall we lose an appre-



ciation of real oratory, of genuine and true sentiment truly and beautifully expressed.

From the time of his lecture on "Progress" in 1860, with its mixed metaphors, its signs of immaturity, Ingersoll thought and worked much and spoke little—out of court. His law practice, which one might expect to hinder—few lawyers were ever orators—at least gave him practice in expression or an increasing control of his too abundant flow of imagery. It usually stifles imagery, but Ingersoll learned how to use his power in court. We are not much concerned with him as a lawyer, and I will merely quote the authority of legal men at the time that he was one of the greatest lawyers of the American Bar.

It was not simply that he could move and convince a jury by his eloquence. He got up a case with meticulous care, and his memory and power of attention were such that he could do so more easily than most lawyers. Smith, whose little biography is valuable because of his contact with Ingersoll, tells us that once he went to consult the great lawyer, in his later years, on an important case. Ingersoll was reading the proofs of an article, and he continued to correct them while Smith stated the particulars of his case. Smith was so astonished that he noticed carefully, and he swears that Ingersoll thoroughly corrected his proofs (a task which includes spotting an s or an o that is upside down), yet listened to him at the same time so attentively that he at once gave shrewd advice on the case. His memory, moreover, was of that rare quality which en-

ables a man to repeat a long passage after a single reading. As a result, he could get up a case with a thoroughness that made him astonish experts. Add that he was a deadly cross-examiner of witnesses, and that he gave opposing counsel great anxiety by his originality—they complained that they never knew what he was going to do—and, with his eloquence, you have a very exceptionally gifted lawyer. But his income from law-practice proves that. He was one of the most prosperous of the time.

This constant practice gave him ease and discipline in expressing himself, but he did little out of court during the sixties. In 1870 he delivered his fine eulogy and defense of Thomas Paine, and two years later he gave the famous oration *The Gods*,\* in which he so cleverly transposes a line of Pope:

An honest God's the noblest work of Man.

In 1875 he visited Europe, with his wife and little daughters, and there was the customary demand for "impressions" when he returned to Peoria. Three passages of the lecture he gave—on the whole a prosy and talky account of his travels—are remarkable. I should say that they were written at sea, in leisure hours, for it is to me—and I have given thousands of lectures—inconceivable that any man should orate such passages extempore. I may say that I have repeatedly asked old friends of Ingersoll and members of his family whether

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\*Little Blue Book No. 185.

he wrote out and learned by heart his great speeches and have received contradictory answers. If he did not so write out and learn, as I believe he usually did, such passages as the three to which I refer, he was a miracle of oratory.

One is on Shakespeare. He tells how, visiting Westminster Abbey in London, he noticed that the quotation from the *Tempest* on the pedestal of the statue of Shakespeare was piously curtailed. They had omitted the last three lines, which have a skeptical note:

We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

Ingersoll says:

But I thought, while standing there, how much greater were those few lines than the cathedral itself. Ignorance and strength can pile up rocks to the very skies, but only a great genius can say a few words that will outlive all the cathedrals upon the breast of the earth.

This I would take to be spontaneous. It is not temperate. But the long passage which follows is a masterpiece. In some five hundred or so words he reviews all the chief characters of Shakespeare's plays, so gracefully and aptly describing each that you lose sight of the large and intimate knowledge of the great poet which he displays.

Later he comes to Dickens, the only novelist fit to put on the same page with Shakespeare, and again he marshals all the famous characters of the master's novels with an unerring delineation of each. Of Burns he says less,

because he had lectured on Burns. These three were his gospels, his inspired writers. Any person who wonders if there was not really some lingering Christian sentiment in Ingersoll has only to read them as he did. To imagine that the Sermon on the Mount rather than their warm emotional humanism—Shakespeare was almost certainly a skeptic, Dickens barely a Unitarian, and Burns an open Rationalist—inspired Robert Ingersoll is quite ludicrous.

The third passage of the lecture has become famous, and, if I am to reproduce here any sample of Ingersoll's eloquence, I choose this. It expresses the feelings he has as he stands before the stately tomb of Napoleon in Paris. He reviews Napoleon's achievements, as a historian does, and then:

And I said I would rather have been a French peasant and worn wooden shoes. I would rather have lived in a hut with a vine growing before the door and the grapes growing purple in the kisses of the autumn sun. I would rather have been that poor peasant with my loving wife by my side, knitting as the day died out of the sky, with my children upon my knees and their arms about me. I would rather have been that man and gone down to the tongueless silence of the dreamless dust than to have been that imperial impersonation of force and murder known as Napoleon the Great.

That is, apart from the judgment on Napoleon, which might be disputed, almost perfect in sentiment and simplicity of expression. Its one defect is the yield to temptation which is betrayed in "the tongueless silence of the dreamless dust." But Ingersoll got to love words, and we can understand it. Curiously

enough, he gives us an example of this on an occasion when we should least expect it, in the short speech at the burial of his beloved brother in 1879:

He climbed the heights and left all superstition far below, while on his forehead fell the golden dawning of a grander day. Life is a narrow vale between the cold and barren peaks of two eternities. We strive in vain to look beyond the heights. We cry aloud, and the only answer is the echo of our wailing cry. From the voiceless lips of the unreplying dead there comes no word; but in the night of death hope sees a star and listening love can hear the rustle of a wing.

Very beautiful and nearly perfect, but the last sentence has no meaning. If a group of Rationalists were minded to carve this passage on the pedestal of a statue of Ingersoll, they would omit the last two lines as apt to mislead. They recall at once the one religious line of Bryant's grand *Thanatopsis*:

Sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust.

The preceding sentences, by the way, seem to show that Ingersoll had read Tennyson's *In Memoriam*; and it is not unlikely that the "narrow vale between the two eternities" was copied, modified, in the best phrase of W. J. Bryan's last speech. Even preachers, as we shall see, have freely borrowed their purple patches from the pages of the great infidel whom they slandered. What speaker in the world would not envy that perfect line: "On his forehead fell the golden dawning of a grander day"? Even the superfluous words of

some of Ingersoll's periods ("voiceless lips of unreplying dead"), or what seem to us in cold print superfluous, must have actually been part of the magic of his oratory when they rolled from the vibrant lips of Ingersoll. He had, as I said, a love of words, and his audience appreciated it. An Illinois lawyer wrote after his death:

He played with words as a child plays with flowers, an artist with the keys of a piano. His voice now painted word pictures of tender thoughts, anon sent forth grand harmonies that shook the souls of strong men and insensibly drew them close and closer still to the matchless orator.

The final epithet is no exaggeration. What he describes, from experience of it, is oratory of all types blended in one man. His tenderness of sentiment and truth and beauty of expression you can still read. Of his other qualities the witnesses tell unanimously. The Peoria Bar Association formed a committee, after Ingersoll's death, to give fitting expression to their sentiments. These lawyers wrote:

When he spoke from the public rostrum, the heavens seemed to thunder and the lightning to flash.

Henry Ward Beecher, who knew something about oratory, introduced Ingersoll to an immense Brooklyn audience in 1880 as "the most brilliant speaker of the English tongue of all men on this globe." And none that even approaches him has appeared since. The test is—read his lectures.

Ingersoll became an orator in a year, as far

as the general public were concerned. On June 15, 1876, the Republican National Convention met at Cincinnati to choose a candidate, and Ingersoll was there. He was known, certainly, for Blaine himself asked Ingersoll to nominate him, and, when he went onto the platform, there was "a surging fury of acclamation" (the press says) which lasted ten minutes. Yet America at large knew him, if at all, only as a gifted lawyer. Within three months he was recognized as the greatest orator in America.

His brother Clark was with him, and, as they went to bed, he asked Robert anxiously if he had prepared that important nomination-speech for tomorrow. Robert had not prepared a word of it and refused to do so. When Ingersoll met a bunch of good fellows in a hotel, there was not much work for anybody, as we shall see later. Clark was disappointed and nervous, but next morning, before breakfast, Robert showed him the draft of the speech. He had awakened at 3 a.m., had risen and set to work, and in an hour or two had finished the speech which made him famous. It is, on the whole, a plain, strong, short speech in the Demosthenic style. Only toward the end the orator gets amongst the familiar flowers:

Prosperity and resumption, when they come, must come together; when they come, they will come hand in hand through the golden harvest fields; hand in hand by the whirling spindles and the turning wheels; hand in hand past the open furnace doors; hand in hand by the chimneys filled with eager fire, greeted and grasped by the countless sons of toil.



One knows painfully how the average politician would tell the economic truth which Ingersoll thus expresses. But on the whole it was a strong terse speech, powerful from its delivery. The effect was like that, later, of Bryan's "Cross of Gold." Ingersoll became the orator of his party.

During the next four months we find him all over the States. The *Chicago Tribune* said: "His voice was the trumpet call from Maine to California." His fame went ahead of him, the press everywhere hailing him as "the greatest orator in America." By October we hear of a crowd of 20,000 persons at Elkhart (a place never before heard of) in Indiana swarming from all quarters, in special trains, to hear him. A fortnight later he was in Chicago, and the Exposition Building could not find room for all who wanted to hear him. He had a packed and enthusiastic audience of fifty thousand. His heart was in his work. His party was, he thought, facing a grave crisis, and that, for him, meant a crisis for his country. It was, he said, "the midnight in the history of the American Republic." Whatever one's political judgment may be on that, Robert Ingersoll rendered mighty service, above all others, by his oratory.

Next year it was proposed that he be "rewarded" by an appointment as ambassador at Berlin. The clergy howled, and the politicians whom he had helped grew prudent. Ingersoll relieved them by saying that he would take neither the embassy nor any other appointment

that they could make. Eleven years later, when the National Republican Convention met once more, in the Chicago Auditorium, Robert Ingersoll was, for the only time in his life, refused a hearing. Heaven forbid that I should suggest that politicians are ungrateful! You see the painful dilemma of the poor men. Ingersoll was worse than an infidel: he was an honest infidel. He insisted on saying so. Competent judges maintain that, had he consented to conceal his Rationalism, he might have become president. He refused to conceal it, and he became a political outcast. And, to crown the irony of it, the politicians deemed him a fool for honesty, and the preachers of honesty insisted that he was a knave. How long will grown-up people tolerate the antics of these two. . . . But first let us see a little about the Rationalist creed for which Ingersoll was prepared to make such sacrifices.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE MISTAKES OF MOSES

In my smaller way I have, at some sacrifice, given Rationalist lectures and written Rationalist works for thirty years, and I am therefore familiar both with the malignant revenge of the people who claim that they alone love their enemies and the "common sense" advice of those who think it folly. At the very outset of my literary career Sir Walter Besant, hardly a Christian himself, warned me not to indulge, as my friend Sir Leslie Stephen did, in such criticism. "We have to tolerate it in Stephen," he said, "but we won't have it from young men like you." It moves, for all that. Another famous writer, an Agnostic in religious robes, still living, tried more prudently to dissuade me. These superstitions would die out: the world was growing more enlightened: this zeal for Truth, with a capital T, was a young man's romantic dream. . . .

Ingersoll somewhere answers all these people in his blunt human way, without capital letters or heroics:

Somebody ought to tell the truth about the Bible. The preachers dare not; because they would be driven from their pulpits. Professors in colleges dare not; because they would lose their salaries. Politicians dare not; because they would be defeated. Editors dare not; they would lose subscribers. Merchants dare not; because they might

lose customers. Men of fashion dare not; fearing that they would lose caste. Even clerks dare not; because they might be discharged. And so I thought I would do it myself. I say to them, "Keep your ideas to yourself: feed and clothe the ones you love: I will do the talking for you. The Church cannot touch, cannot crush, cannot starve, cannot stop or stay me; I will express your thoughts."

That is sound language to unbelievers generally, but the believer puts his finger on the second word of this passage, and asks why "ought"? For two reasons, each of which contains quite as much common sense as, and much more sincerity than, the light phrases of the Gallios. One is that religion is still a very practical matter. Ingersoll was speaking from knowledge when, in the above passage, he counted the various classes of men, nearly all classes in the community, who dare not say what they think. A pretty situation for free America, certainly. The bulk of them are still not free. The professors only recently have shivered under the crack of the clerical whip. The politicians have signed the clerical blank check. Whose turn will it be next? The dress-makers? The tobacconists? The men who run theaters and cinemas on Sundays? Oh, a pretty situation for the year 1927, when half the population could not tell you even the names of these invisible clerical despots! How extraordinarily foolish of any man to want to talk about it!

The second reason is just honest and healthy impatience of lies and delusions. Ingersoll loved Liberty, with a capital L, but, if he at times, as is the custom, used Truth with the

capital T, he really meant that he hated lies. He hated to see people deceived. Rather than sit by the fire, with a cigar between his teeth, while a very imperfectly educated gentleman was telling utterly false things to a few hundred men and women in the next block on a Sunday night, he preferred to go and hire a hall and tell them the truth. Heroics? No, not a bit of it; though in his case, for his life was often seriously threatened, the act approaches heroism. But in itself, on principle, it is just as natural as the act of a man who starts out on a campaign for spelling reform, porous underclothing, free verse, or bobbed hair.

Preachers in Ingersoll's day were proclaiming the inspiration of the Bible from cover to cover. The Pentateuch was inspired to Moses. The world was created in six days or acts. And Ingersoll was reading Darwin and Huxley. . . . In other words, he went outside and poured his shot into the churches simply because he was "Honest Bob" and couldn't help it. People *want* to know the truth.

It is their paid officials, the clergy, who invent this fiction about "disturbing people's minds." And it is all to the good. All education, especially through criticism, is healthy. In fine, Ingersoll knew from his own experience that humanism as an inspiration would make a better world than Christianity had done. It happens that in the intervals of writing this book I am reading an overdue novel by one of the finest historical novelists of our day, Jeffery Farnol's *Amateur Gentleman*. It

is a particularly broad and detailed picture of life a century ago. What a mighty advance we have made—through humanism! Let us try more of it, said Ingersoll.

The first condition was to shatter the fetich of the traditional view of the Bible. This was the greatest hindrance to humanism, since it represented man as cursed and barren. Ingersoll was not what would be called in the academic world a scholar, but he knew the Bible thoroughly. When he was in camp at St. Louis, he used to pass the time gambling with the chaplain. He bet that if the chaplain would open the book at random and read out any verse he chose, Ingersoll would give him from memory the preceding and the following verse. The chaplain lost money and discovered that gambling was improper.

*Some Mistakes of Moses* was the chief and most popular outcome of his critical attitude toward the Bible. It began as a lecture, first delivered in 1879, and was later expanded into a book. For its motto Ingersoll wrote: "The destroyer of weeds, thistles, and thorns is a benefactor whether he soweth grain or not." He always laughed at the anemic objection to "mere negation." At the least he was clearing the prairies for others to sow. But he sowed himself in every heart that read him. Inspiring passages from his writings are framed on the walls of thousands of houses in America. Fathers and mothers would rather have their children read the beautiful words of Bob Ingersoll, the Infidel, than the words of Jesus, to say nothing of Moses and Ezekiel and Hosea.

Ingersoll begins by observing that the Bible legends are "beautiful, though false," and have "enriched the heart and enkindled thought"; and what he wants is to "broaden the intellectual horizon of our people . . . to do away with the blind worship of the ignoble past." I quote this only for the edification of the folk who never read Ingersoll, but pose (though unbelievers) as superior to him because they "see the beauty" in the Bible. Candidly, I don't; and I have read it all in Latin and English many times, very much of it in Greek, and a lot in Hebrew. I like Ingersoll better when he gets to this:

The real oppressor, enslaver, and corruptor of the people is the Bible. That book is the chain that binds, the dungeon that holds, the clergy. That book spreads the pall of superstition over the colleges and schools. That book puts out the eyes of science and makes honest investigation a crime. That book unmans the politician and degrades the people. That book fills the world with bigotry, hypocrisy and fear.

Superior people came after Ingersoll and said that this was naughty and intemperate and untrue, and you must join hands with your erring Bible-brother, and . . . And these good folk were quite astonished when, in 1925, the Fundamentalist guillotine began to chop. The above "intemperate" passage is as prosy a picture of Tennessee today as is the Geological Survey.

Scholarship was not needed for Ingersoll's purpose. He made no pretense of quoting the Hebrew text. He seems to have known noth-



ing about the Higher Critic's analysis into Jahvist and Elohist and Jahvist-Elohist. It was unnecessary. He gets there all the same. Instead of following him, let us take for a moment what Roman Catholics (and many others, on the quiet) take to be a crushing exposure of the ignorance, even dishonesty, of Ingersoll's book; which they have never read. I mean Father Lambert's *Notes on Ingersoll*.

The early part of it is taken up with the familiar ancient verbiage about first causes and necessary beings and finite universes and laws of nature: the arguments for God and immortality which, as William James said, already "gather dust in our libraries"—unless they are Catholic libraries. You might just as profitably chew sawdust as answer these things. Let us take the eighth chapter, in which the reverend author blushes so deeply for the blunders, the trickery, the falsehoods of the great Agnostic that you feel there must really be something in it.

First it appears that, when Ingersoll represents the first commandment as "the death of art" in Judea, he has shamelessly garbled the text. It appears that the Bible does not forbid the Jews to carve statues, but to "adore and serve them." What extraordinary things these priests can say to their guileless flocks! The commandment very plainly forbids the Jews (*Exodus* xx, 4) to *make* images or to worship them; and it is a command to the laity, so that images made by Moses or the priests would not matter, even if we took those parts of the Bible as historical, and we know that

they are fraudulent. What Father Lambert forgot was to name any artist or sculptor in the whole course of Hebrew civilization, which he believes to have lasted a thousand years.

Then it appears that the terrible slaughters of the Canaanites were quite all right, perfectly justified, because the Canaanites were very wicked. The Jews say so, and there you are.

But the Lambertian method is seen at its best in the next passage. Ingersoll had expressed his horror at the Bible making Jehovah himself hand over the young women of defeated tribes to the mercies of the Jewish soldiers. The priest's white hands go up toward heaven. The Bible, he says, very strictly guards these maids from the philandering of the troops by enjoining that the soldiers are to *marry* them. Father Lambert refers us to *Deuteronomy*, xxi, 10-14. Very naïve to end at v. 14, for the next verse reminds us that the soldier might have several other "wives" already. In fact, even in v. v. 13 and 14, the procedure is clear enough. The girl is taken at once into the soldier's house, but he must give her a month to mourn and then—no question of ceremony. The text adds that he can put her out of doors when he likes. Naturally a soldier on the warpath would be rigorously pure until the appointed time with a maid amongst his spoils.

And the crown of the matter is that Ingersoll had expressly referred his readers, not to *Deuteronomy*, which puts a mild sort of gloss on the brutal old practice, but to *Numbers*, xxxi, where not a word is said about marriage. The passage more than justifies what Ingersoll

says. It is a picture of sheer barbarism. The troops kill all the male non-combatants and appropriate all the women and girls. Then Moses and the High Priest express mighty indignation, not that they have not gone through some form of marriage with the girls, but that they have allowed the mothers to live! These anointed of the Lord then compel them to cut the throats of all the mothers (twenty to thirty thousand!) and retain the virgins (thirty-two thousand). Marriage is not mentioned. It is a veritable orgy of barbarism—or would be, if it were not transparent fiction—yet the Catholic, who will verify the points neither in Ingersoll nor the Bible (the correct reference to which Father Lambert has suppressed), boasts that his Father Lambert has given Ingersoll "the heaviest thrashing he ever had." The book has neither ability nor honesty. Ingersoll ignored it, and I have persistently refused requests that I should answer it. The above specimen of a "refutation" will suffice.

A more serious controversy followed an article on "The Christian Religion" which he published in the *North American Review*. Ingersoll had entitled his article "Is All of the Bible Inspired?" which was in those early days supposed to be a very serious question, but the editor changed the title and tried to disarm his religious readers by having a reply to Ingersoll. Judge Black, who replied, had all the arrogance and not more than the capability of the third-rate apologist. His defense of every relic of barbarism in ancient Judea, under the impression that Jehovah either instituted or sanc-

tioned the slavery, polygamy, slaughter, etc., reads very curiously today in the pages of such a magazine. Whatever reaction the future may have in store, readers of the leading magazines will never again see in them such incredible piffle from the pen of a distinguished lawyer; and for that advance America owes more to Ingersoll than to any other man.

The Judge's points were easily answered. They were the familiar threadbare arguments, from the laws of nature and their legislator to the philanthropic inspiration of Christianity. No great learning was needed, but Ingersoll shows that he had studied acutely each phase of the religious question. There is, for instance, still in the religious mind the old idea of "laws of nature" as some code of conduct, analogous to human laws, which is prescribed in advance for material bodies; on which assumption, of course, the existence of a legislator is clear as the noon-day sun and the atheist is a fool or a knave. I found in debate with Fundamentalist leaders in California in 1926 that they had this idea in as naïve a form as it was held by Talmage. Ingersoll gave the right answer to it half a century ago:

Law does not cause the phenomenon, but the phenomenon causes the idea of law in our minds.

Ingersoll, temperately but with deadly effect, exposed the senilities of the apologist's statements, and no rejoinder to him appeared in the *Review*. Black's friends made the amusing suggestion that Ingersoll, dreading another severe castigation, had induced the editor to refuse to

re-admit Black. The editor denied this, and one can easily understand that he was unwilling to have the cultural level of his magazine lowered once more by such absurdities.

Some years later the *North American Review* published an article, "Colonel Ingersoll on Christianity," from the pen of one of the most distinguished of British statesmen, Mr. Gladstone; which was, in effect, one of the greatest tributes ever paid to the position and influence of Ingersoll. Gladstone took his faith even more seriously than his politics, to the fine amusement of his skeptical rival Disraeli. He was, moreover, as Morley has abundantly shown, a really fine scholar—certainly as regards Greek—and he engaged in controversy in England only with the highest representatives of Rationalism, such as Huxley. But Gladstone had all the weaknesses of the semi-Modernist and was so unlucky as to consider them his strength. He referred flatteringly to the "rare and enviable brilliancy" of Ingersoll, claiming only that the impetuosity of his character had carried him from ancient orthodox into Agnosticism without proper consideration of the intermediate position. Dignified and leisurely persons like Mr. Gladstone—it is said that he chewed a morsel of meat systematically fourteen times before he swallowed it—of course saw the wisdom of this intermediate position, this slight liberalizing of the creed, which made it suitable for even the most intellectual palate, and Mr. Gladstone proceeded, with all his customary solemnity and lack of humor, to expound the truth.

Ingersoll was, as usual, temperate in his reply, but open-minded ministers must have recognized with pain the ease with which he refuted the leading churchman of Britain. Huxley, ever twinkling and caustic, wrote to Ingersoll:

Gladstone's attack on you is one of the best things he has written. I do not think there is more than fifty percent more verbiage than necessary, nor any sentence with more than two meanings. If he goes on improving at this rate, he will be an English classic by the time he is ninety.

The pompous verbiage was, in fact, too much for Ingersoll, and he put Gladstone out of the arena with this remark:

After all, it may be that "to ride an unbroken horse with the reins thrown upon his neck"—as you charge me with doing—gives a greater variety of sensations, a keener delight, and a better prospect of winning the race than to sit solemnly astride a dead one, in "a deep reverential calm," with the bridle firmly in your hand.

The reply was easy, for what I call the slightly liberal Gladstonian attitude is now recognized to have been only a temporary phase in the journey (backwards) to "the real truth." Evolution *might* be true, but was in any case consistent with *Genesis*, said Gladstone. Ingersoll's nimble wit was quite enough to dispose of this ancient pastime of reconciling *Genesis* and science by re-interpreting a word here and there. He adds:

Many will regret that you do not give your views upon the main questions—the principal issues—involved, instead of calling attention, for the most part, to the unimportant. If men were discussing

the causes and results of the Franco-Prussian war, it would hardly be worth while for a third person to interrupt the argument for the purpose of calling attention to a misspelled word in the terms of surrender.

The main points for Ingersoll, and for every man with his sheer honesty and strength and directness of mind, were three: the crudities of the Old Testament, the crudity of the fundamental Christian doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement, and the fact that nature shows no evidence of design and very much against it. People who are now learned in mythology, geology, conchology, or something, talk about Ingersoll's relatively scanty erudition. He needed no more. With the knowledge he had he met every opponent effectively. Cardinal Manning of England entered the lists after Gladstone, to put "the Catholic position." Answering him must have felt to Ingersoll like thumping a pugilist's dummy after dealing with Gladstone. As to the riff-raff of the evangelical world, with their infidel death-bed stories and mendacious trash of that sort, Ingersoll had only to splutter his disdain.

These controversies were forced upon him, and he dealt quite adequately with them, but his great work was the delivery of his magnificent orations to the general public: *Thomas Paine*, *The Gods*, *Heretics and Heresies*, *Liberty of Man, Woman and Child*, *The Ghosts*, *Some Reasons Why*, *The Great Infidels*, etc. His main points were, as I said, simple, direct, and vital, and they lent themselves to his emotional eloquence. He rejected the Old Testament as an inspired book for the plain unanswerable



reason that it was not even a decent human book as a whole. He rejected the New Testament because it was late, anonymous, and full of contradictions, and embodied a story about an incarnation which is puerile, and about an atonement and hell which outrages our ethical and humane sentiments. He rejected the belief in immortality because it was not proved, and he rejected the belief in God because the facts of nature and life conflict most profoundly with that belief, and there is, on the other hand, no serious evidence in its favor.

It is on these plain and fundamental issues that he is happiest and rendered the greatest service. It really matters very little whether Jesus ever lived, whether he is a solar myth, whether religion began in animism or phallism or anything else. Ingersoll had no ambition to write learned constructive treatises for brother Rationalists. The three great hindrances to the proper development of the humanist inspiration of life were the popular belief in the Bible, Christ, and God. He went straight for that belief, and he did more than any man since Voltaire and Paine to emancipate the race from superstition. People *had* to listen to him. He was the great orator. At one place in which he advertised a lecture, at two days' notice, a popular circus had been beating up public interest for weeks. The circus did little business, while Ingersoll—the proprietor of the circus angrily said—reaped a profit of \$4,000 in one night. And no theme was more suited to his eloquence or more movingly stirred the chords of his emotional nature than the cruelty in the

Bible and the cruelty in nature. Bishop Butler had argued against the Deists that the cruelty in the Old Testament did not dissociate it from God because there was equal cruelty in nature, of which the Deists considered God the author. "That is to say," Ingersoll retorted, "he succeeded in showing that both Gods are bad."

He called himself Agnostic only because the word Atheist implies, in its ordinary usage and (as I have shown in another book) in its derivation, a denial of the existence of God, and it is impossible to prove a negative. While, however, one cannot in the strict sense prove a negative, there may be a vast amount of evidence in favor of the negative position and little or none for the affirmative. Ingersoll quite recognized that this was the situation in regard to the existence of God. Agnostic does not mean simply that one "does not know," or one has an open mind on the subject. When Lyman Abbott imprudently ventured upon the familiar jibe at the word Agnostic, Ingersoll finely retorted:

The Agnostic does not simply say, "I do not know." He goes another step, and he says, with great emphasis, that you do not know. He insists that you are trading on the ignorance of others and on the fears of others. He is not satisfied with saying that you do not know—he demonstrates that you do not know; and he drives you from the field of fact, he drives you from the realm of reason, he drives you from the light into the darkness of conjecture, into the world of dreams and shadows, and he compels you to say, at last, that your faith has no foundation in fact.

To the small-minded parrots who repeat every year the time-worn charge that without God

there can be no sense of honor or decency Ingersoll replied with his whole life and teaching. In an early year, when he was lecturing with deadly effect in San Francisco, the clergy telegraphed to Peoria for any unfavorable reports that could be used against his character. They could get none, and none have ever been invented. He lived a transparent life: smoked his cigar and said "Damn" in public, and drank water and kept his kindliness in private just as he did in public. Very few men amongst the millions who shuddered at his name, or listened to vilification of him by the lower type of preacher, could compare with him for a moment in character. But the next chapter will give us a convenient occasion for discussing this.

## CHAPTER V

## INGERSOLL'S PERSONALITY

The character of Ingersoll will have been perceived by the reader throughout the preceding chapters. The stamp of his personality was upon everything that he did or said, and the impression is one that must engage the admiration of all. He never posed, and he disliked the idea of being written about. A writer who wished to include a sketch of him in a work on prominent New Yorkers came to enlist his interest. Most men would have paid the author \$500 or so. It is the age of the publicity agent. Ingersoll quietly asked him what the price of the book would be. It was to cost \$10. "Then," said Ingersoll, "I will pay fifty dollars and take five copies if you will leave my name out of it." He knew the worth of biographies. Writing once of such things, he said:

Washington is only a steel engraving. About the real man who lived and hated and schemed we know but little. . . . Hundreds of people are now engaged in smoothing out the lines of Lincoln's face—forcing all the features to the common mould—so that he may be known, not as he really was, but, according to their poor standard, as he should have been.

As I showed in another book (*Seven Infidel U. S. Presidents*, Little Blue Book No. 1203), Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, and

Lincoln can be shown on the most absolute evidence to have been Rationalists, and their more responsible biographers admit it. Yet most of America is astounded, and half of it outraged, when you mention the fact.

Statesmen are peculiarly liable to have their portraits "touched" and idealized. But famous Rationalists are just as liable to have warts painted in where no warts exist, and we may be sure that no vices have been buried with their bones. Of Paine, as I said in Little Blue Book No. 1205, *Thomas Paine's Revolt Against the Bible*, libelous lies appeared long before he had quitted the earth, and other prominent skeptics have had the same experience. Yet I am not aware that any libels were ever printed about Ingersoll. He was personally known to thousands, for he was one of the most accessible and sociable of men. He was one of the least secretive and diplomatic of men. He had malignant clerical eyes upon his career for decades, ready to magnify any weakness into a "fruit of infidelity." But the devil's advocate gave him up. "Honest Bob" he lived and died; and those who knew him still talk with enthusiasm of the charm and generosity of his personality.

There was a spontaneity, a humanity, in his actions which one rarely finds in the public conduct of men who publicly profess high ideals. Once, after a Rationalist lecture in England, I retired, in broad daylight, to the nearest bar. "Mr. ——— would never have done that," said my companion. It appeared that Mr. ———, a well-known Rationalist lec-

turer, became just as thirsty, but he would enter no bar within five blocks of the lecture-room, lest his audience see him. It is the fashion of reformers.

Ingersoll was never unctuous or sanctimonious. He had once some business with a man whose virtue was his pride. Ingersoll questioned him. "Do you drink? Do you chew? Do you smoke?" There was a proud negative to each. "Do you eat hay?" asked Ingersoll; and when the surprised man denied it, he said: "Then you are not fit company for either man or beast." In his lecture on Burns he said, instead of finding apologies for the poet's drunkenness:

I would rather knock at the gate of St. Peter dead drunk and be able to say, I am Bobby Burns, than to own up that I was sober and a Presbyterian.

A good youth was once boasting to him of the virtues of his father. "My father was one of those who absolutely could do no wrong," he said. "I guess you didn't know him," said Ingersoll. And there was no priggishness in his reply to certain politicians who thought his views on Christ very indiscreet:

Gentlemen, it isn't to have you think that I would call Christ an illegitimate child which hurts me; it is to think that you should think that I would think any the less of Christ if I knew it was so.

His quick sense of humor was a valuable aid to his oratory, and Smith's little biography, which is, as I said, the most valuable in its

intimate account, is full of amusing stories. At a political meeting some small Democratic interrupter goaded him at length to say:

My Connemara friend, I am here tonight to kill the Democratic dog, but, by God, I have not time for the fleas.

At another meeting an old man just in front of the platform persisted in heckling him. Ingersoll poured his decanter of water over the man, and said: "Now, my friend, you go and dry up." On one of his visits to California he was very much bored by the question, from everybody he met: "What do you think of our climate?" It happened to rain heavily on the night of the lecture, and Ingersoll came on to the platform with visible signs of it. "What do you think of our climate?" he began.

In trains, hotels, and streets he had a laughing group around him. A clergyman insisted on arguing with him in a train, and challenged him to name one particular in which he would have made creation better. "I'd make good health catching," Ingersoll said. Infant baptism was put to him in another place. At once he replied:

I think it is a nice state of things when an infant babe must be held up by the feet, up to the light, to find God's watermark.

He once sheltered under a tree with a Baptist deacon during a thunder-storm, and it occurred to the deacon that Ingersoll was a little nervous. "I thought you didn't believe in God," he said. That was just the point, said Inger-



soll. He would not be nervous if he thought the lightning guided, but "I know it is not, and that it is just as likely to hit me as an old fool like you." At one place it was announced that he had a sore throat and a local clergyman wrote to say that it was probably cancer and a punishment. Ingersoll replied that he "didn't blame God for giving a sore throat to any man whose arguments he couldn't answer." When a piqued lawyer in court insisted that his word would go as far as Ingersoll's, Ingersoll retorted: "Yes, but it would not be worth a damn when it gets there."

His generosity was as impulsive as his humor. People were surprised at the relatively small sum he left when he died, for he had for years made \$100,000 a year. This was partly because he made unwise investments, partly because he spent money almost extravagantly on things for himself and his family, and partly because he had been in the habit of giving away about a quarter (it is estimated) of his income. A Little Blue Book could be filled with authentic anecdotes of his generosity. Even in his kitchen there was always a cigar-box containing money to be given away. Once he heard a street preacher make a virulent attack on him. The man was poorly dressed and Ingersoll, whom he did not recognize, took him to a store and bought him new clothes. The man asked his name, and Ingersoll mischievously gave it. In his confusion the preacher wanted to give back the clothes, but Ingersoll asked him "as a favor" to retain them; and the incident ended with the man

confessing that he had been paid by a clerical organization to vilify him. The sight of a shoeless boy in winter would send his hand into his pocket, and he sometimes did not look at the note he gave. To one such boy he gave a \$20 note, and had then not enough money to pay his own fare.

His home was irradiated by this warm-heartedness and generosity. In Washington, to which he moved from Peoria in 1877 (and later to New York), a story was current of a servant failing to get employment when she said that she had been at the Ingersoll's. The lady would have nobody from so "extravagant" a home. "Why," she says, "I hear that on chicken nights there is a whole chicken for everybody." "Yes, and for each servant, too," said the girl. Ingersoll counted no cost, and never asked prices. Honor and sobriety he esteemed above all things, but he would have none of the hypocritical or pedantic disdain of "merely material things." He liked comfort, and said so; and no man spent more in giving comfort to others. To the members of his family he made no set allowances. He kept an open drawer well supplied with money and wife and daughters took from it what they wanted at any time and were never asked to give an account. On one occasion a Baptist congregation appealed to him for a subscription toward a new roof for their chapel. He gave one—but slyly added that he did not see why Baptists should mind getting wet.

No man ever wrote more beautiful sentiments about home and love of wife and chil-

dren; and no other man who ever wrote such sentiments was as sincere as Ingersoll.

In the air of kindness your children will grow about you like flowers. They will fill your homes with sunshine and all your years with joy. . . .

If upon this earth we ever have a glimpse of heaven, it is when we pass a home in winter at night, and, through the windows, the curtains drawn aside, we see the family about the pleasant hearth. . . . I never passed such a house without feeling that I had received a benediction. . . .

And, do you know, it is a splendid thing to think that the woman you really love will never grow old to you. Through the wrinkles of time, through the mark of years, if you really love her, you will always see the face you loved and won. . . .

These things were not borrowed by Ingersoll—as Billy Sunday and other preachers borrowed them from Ingersoll—nor were they virtuosities of language carefully constructed in order to edify. They were spontaneous expressions of Ingersoll's emotions and experiences. He had a beautiful nature. He was, said the great leader of the women-movement, Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "peerless among the great and good men of the nineteenth century." He was, said that exacting critic, Clarence Darrow, "a great soul of matchless courage, one of the great men of the earth." Mark Twain and Walt Whitman, highest judges of men, wrote superlatively of him. Andrew Carnegie coupled him with Lincoln. It could not be otherwise. Instead of shivering in a starless night when his creed went out, he found at once a new star: "My gospel will cover the

earth with happy homes." His creed he once thus summarized:

I believe that	{	happiness is the only good;
		reason the only torch;
		justice the only worship;
		humanity the only religion;
		and love the only priest.

That is the creed of all Rationalists. Those are the real fruits of infidelity. But all Rationalists have not the finely-balanced and generous-impulsed nature of Robert Ingersoll; and few have the great gifts that enabled Ingersoll to create such a home as his creed required and such responsive members in it. Years after his death I found the famous Ingersoll home—with his widow, her sister, Mrs. Farrell, and Ingersoll's old publisher, Mr. Farrell, his two daughters and his grandson and grand-daughter—in New York saturated with the Ingersoll ideal. My good friend, Mrs. Ingersoll-Brown, who so fitly sustains her great father's ideal of service, will, I know, pardon me if I reproduce the only criticism I ever heard. "It's too saccharine," said a friend to me. Few homes are ever described as "too sweet."

Yet temperamental caution and a large knowledge of biographies as means of concealing the truth made me still hesitate to think that Ingersoll's emotional passages were just a spontaneous outpour of a fine spirit until, when I had to write a large biography of George Jacob Holyoake, the British Rationalist

who was nearest to Ingersoll in fineness of character, I came to handle a large number of Ingersoll's private letters, poured hot from his heart. It was just the same language as in his great orations. He disliked and distrusted Charles Bradlaugh, and thought little of any other British or American Rationalist of prominence, but he loved Holyoake. One of his letters to Holyoake answers those skeptics who blame him that he founded no organization to sustain his work:

Organization always brings envy and *littleness* to the front. It is easy to work for a cause, but it is generally hard to work with others. They become jealous and hostile. I want just as little as possible to do with folks. I do not care to lead, but I hate to follow the egotistic and idiotic.

He wrote that a few months before he died. Every man who has had experiences analogous to his, whether in religious or anti-religious propaganda, knows the truth of it. Idealists are often bad cabin-mates. Professional idealists are apt to be grafters and hypocrites. Ingersoll lived his great life and did his massive work alone. "I am," he said, shortly before his death, "thankful to know I have lived long enough to put the brand of inferiority on the intellectual brow of orthodoxy." He had.

No man had, on quitting the world, less reason to repine or regret. The infidel-deathbed legend is as incongruous to attempt to fit on him as it would be to make a dying Pope utter blasphemies. His end was as tranquil as that of any man that ever lived. Up to the night of July 20-21, 1899, he had no reason to think

of death as even near his horizon. Some digestive trouble then gave him a restless night, and he was indisposed in the morning. He sat up, at noon, and proposed to lunch with the others. "How white your tongue is," his wife said to him. He looked at her, smiling, and said: "I am better now." And he sank gently back in his chair and died.



